



STATE OF IOWA

TERRY E. BRANSTAD
GOVERNOR

KIM REYNOLDS
LT. GOVERNOR

OFFICE OF DRUG CONTROL POLICY
DALE R. WOOLERY, ACTING DIRECTOR

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Contact:
Susie Sher (515) 725-0300

Iowa Plan Aims to Contain Growing Prescription Drug Abuse Threat

DES MOINES – The Governor's Office of Drug Control Policy (ODCP) issued a report today, citing prescription drug abuse as one of the fastest-growing forms of substance abuse in Iowa. The report—*Reducing Prescription Drug Abuse in Iowa: A State Strategy*—makes a series of recommendations for containing what it describes as a relatively small, but rapidly developing, threat.

"The very medicines that work wonders treating injuries and alleviating pain increasingly are being abused by Iowans, leading to more accidents, injuries, addiction and deaths," said Dale Woolery, Acting Director of ODCP. "Pain pills and other medicines prescribed and dispensed by health care professionals typically are safe when used as intended, but some are as dangerous as illegal drugs such as heroin or cocaine when they're not used properly."

"Though Iowa has the nation's lowest rate of prescription drug abuse, the problem is quickly growing and action is required to prevent more injuries and deaths," said Woolery.

According to the ODCP report, Iowa tied with Nebraska for the nation's lowest rate (3.6 percent) of prescription drug abuse in 2008-2009, the most recent data available. However, the report says Iowa drug overdose deaths involving prescription pain relievers—namely methadone and other opioids—increased 875 percent over the last decade, from four in 2000 to 39 in 2010, and now outnumber illicit drug overdose deaths by more than two to one. Also, substance abuse treatment admissions for prescription medication abuse or addiction increased 370 percent from 1999 to 2009.

In addition to seeking input and analyzing data from a variety of sources over the last six months, ODCP convened a 33-member task force of health care professionals, substance abuse service providers, law enforcement officers and other concerned citizens to examine prescription drug abuse in Iowa.

“Thanks to the contributions of task force members and others, recommendations have been developed in four areas,” said Woolery. “To reduce prescription drug diversion and abuse in Iowa, we must: (1) enhance public and professional education; (2) adopt safe practices to personally store and dispose of medicines; (3) strengthen techniques to investigate and enforce violations of law; and perhaps most importantly, (4) improve the ability of health care professionals to monitor patient medicines through use of Iowa’s electronic Prescription Monitoring Program.”

Some of the recommendations included in the report:

Education and Intervention

- Develop a public service media campaign and other educational materials (e.g., www.TakeADoseOfTruth.com) to help Iowa parents talk more effectively with children about the potential dangers of prescription drug abuse.
- Enhance graduate and continuing education for health care professionals, to include current information on pain treatment and prescription drug abuse.

Secure Storage and Safe Disposal

- Promote proper medicine cabinet practices at home to prevent medicine misuse or theft, and to protect the environment.
- Expand authorized drop-off opportunities to make it easier for Iowans to safely dispose of unused prescription medicines, particularly controlled substances.

Enforcement

- Provide training that improves the ability of law enforcement officers and prosecutors to utilize Iowa’s Prescription Monitoring Program and enforce complex prescription drug diversion and other laws.
- Promote continued law enforcement support of drug drop-off events.

Monitoring

- Update Iowa’s Prescription Monitoring Program to: increase the speed with which pharmacists report prescription transactions; expand reporting requirements to include out-of-state and mail order pharmacies; allow Iowa’s system to share authorized information with other states; and develop automatic prescription drug alerts to proactively notify health care professionals of potentially suspicious or dangerous activity.
- Provide Prescription Monitoring Program training and education for health care professionals, to increase utilization of the Iowa system and improve patient care.

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